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ABSTRACT

In this research synthesis, notions of literacy from a variety of inclusive rather than exclusive perspectives are presented. Notions of national literacies, mother-tongue literacies, multiple literacies, and bi-literacies are explored. Information and research pertaining to threatened languages, language shift, and language loss is presented, because of the obvious significance these phenomena hold for indigenous communities throughout the world. Furthermore, a number of issues regarding first language literacy instruction are explored, using examples from all over the world. Included in this discussion is status of language, acquisition planning, and corpus planning. Finally, the uses of literacy in a variety of communities and contexts are examined. It is concluded that choices regarding literacy made by indigenous communities are highly divergent. In instances where communities have a true voice, where the choice is not heavily influenced by socioeconomically dominant groups, mother tongues are embraced. For the vast majority of indigenous communities, where such free choices are not available, the language of economics often triumphs over the language of hearth and home. Contains 40 references. (KFT)

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LITERACY IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

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LITERACY IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

By L. David van Broekhuizen*

November 2000

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Literacy has in recent years become the foundation of reform efforts and other comprehensive improvement initiatives throughout the country. Indeed, there are few communities that have not been exhorted to focus on literacy for both adults and children. Currently, national, state, and local initiatives focusing specifically on reading have dominated the education scene with programs such as America Reads, Reading is Fundamental, and Every Child a Reader. As a result of this national fervor, literacy has become the focal point for targeted research, longitudinal study, and implementation. Thus, embarking upon the writing of a research synthesis on literacy seemed simple and straightforward. There is ample literacy research upon which to base such a document, and it is readily accessible in a variety of electronic and print formats. However, expanding this notion of literacy to include first-language literacy in indigenous communities significantly increases the number of issues to be addressed and the complexity of the topic.

Literacy in first languages in indigenous communities is a topic that generates lively discussion. Most indigenous languages are non-dominant languages. There is usually an official language that prevails in one way or another by virtue of its prestige status, use in wider communication, or status as the accepted standard dialect and a factor in upward mobility. Nevertheless, indigenous languages throughout the world continue to struggle for survival. And many consider literacy to be essential to their continued existence.

The International Literacy Institute (1996, p. 1) offers an innovative and comprehensive definition of literacy:

> The term literacy covers a broad range of positive qualities that are essential to define the objectives and scope of work in the field [of literacy research]. These include:
> - hierarchies of skills and knowledge (from component skills to discourse genres),
> - continua of skills and knowledge (from basic to advanced levels),
> - varieties of skills and knowledge functions (from domain specific to generic),
> - cultural definitions of knowledge, skills, and practices.

Limiting the discussion to include only a psychologistic and culturally narrow approach to literacy predominated by Western-based philosophy would have made the task much more manageable. There exist exhaustive volumes of written work in a variety of genres, long-standing traditions for teaching and learning, and an extensive and broad research base. As more and more indigenous communities come face to face with issues of literacy, global economics, and *force majeur* cultural and linguistic preservation, focusing on how these issues play themselves out in authentic indigenous-language settings is both timely and of great relevance.

> In a world which is simultaneously coming together as a global society while it splinters apart into ever smaller ethnically defined pieces, the two-faced potential of literacy to both open and bar doors of opportunity becomes increasingly evident. (Hornberger, 1997, p. 3)

With the advent of telecommunications technologies that link the world in seconds and span tens of thousands of miles with the click of a mouse, the world is becoming smaller and smaller. The barriers of time and distance are being rendered null and void by both synchronous and asynchronous modes of communication that allow "connections" across the world. However, technology innovators have shown little concern for the impact this rapidly changing state of world affairs is having on minority-language communities. These are being forced out of existence by the language of the World Wide Web, mostly English and other "global" languages whose political, social, and economic power silences the voices of smaller groups with cultural and linguistic traditions unique in this consumer's world of increasing ubiquity and genericism.

Bledsoe and Robey (in Street, 1993, p. 110) assert that "we do not yet fully understand how the introduction of writing into a non-literate society necessarily changes communication or the nature of social interaction."

> It is therefore of utmost urgency that we do not limit our definition of literacy to include only that which we know or have been taught to value, for "literacy is not one uniform technical skill, but rather it is something which varies in each different context and society in which it is embedded. (Street, in Hornberger, 1997, p. 5)

When discussing literacy practices in indigenous communities, what are the issues of most concern? It is of particular importance that we do not predefine or value/devalue literacy practices in indigenous communities. The tendency is to develop expectations and form judgments based on our own cultural orientations, which are deeply rooted in our experiences and beliefs. We measure "success" using rubrics, frameworks, and other tools that help define our own notions of literacy. Most often these include strictly set systems of alphabets and writing (orthography), decoding skills (phonics), and text comprehension of culturally determined topics about people, places, objects, or concepts familiar or unknown to the reader. Street (1993, p. 1) reminds us that "the rich cultural variation in . . . [social] practices and conceptions [of reading and writing] leads us to rethink what we mean by them and to be wary of assuming a single literacy where we may simply be imposing assumptions derived from our own cultural practice onto other people's literacies." The importance of "book knowledge" (memorized pieces of trivia or other insignificant pieces of information) is emphasized in the western notion of literacy (recall the overwhelming popularity

of the game Trivial Pursuit). There is very little mention of oral literacy in our media-driven society, which values visual and printed material in a variety of multimedia forms. However, indigenous communities still find ways to construct literacy to suit their needs.

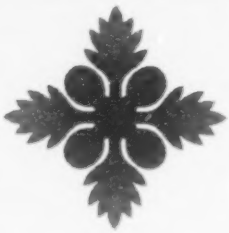
Indeed, Faraclas (1994) reports with much enthusiasm regarding first-language literacy efforts in Papua, New Guinea:

> The movement for Critical Literacies in PNG has redefined literacy itself. Literacy is no longer the power to decode and encode written texts. This is only a peripheral and even nonessential aspect of literacy. For thousands of Papua New Guineans, literacy has become synonymous with the power to critically read and creatively write the discourses, versions of culture, and other structures and systems that determine how and why we live our lives. The remarkable success of local language literacy and "maintenance" programmes over the past five years owes more to this revolution in the way that Papua New Guineans are thinking about their languages, cultures, and lives than to any other intervention by "experts" from overseas. (p. 2)

In this research synthesis we will attempt to present the notion of literacy from a variety of inclusive, rather than exclusive, perspectives. The notions of national literacies, mother-tongue literacies, multiple literacies and bi-literacies will be explored. We will present information and research pertaining to threatened languages, language shift, and language loss because of the obvious implications of these phenomena for the indigenous communities throughout the world. Furthermore, we will touch upon some of the issues regarding first-language literacy instruction, providing examples from all over the world. Included in this discussion will be status of language, acquisition planning, and corpus planning. Finally, we will examine uses for literacy in a variety of communities and contexts.

We are acutely aware of the many "literacies" that exist in today's world. Cultural literacy, literacy in particular areas of knowledge (like technology), and oral literacy all merit further study. However, for the purposes of this research synthesis, we will approach literacy at its most basic and probably best-known level (i.e., the act of reading and writing). The expertise with which an individual or group manipulates these skills and how the skills are acquired and used in culturally relevant ways will be what drives this document.

National, Mother Tongue, and Multiple Literacies



National Literacy

The term "national literacy" suggests a singular ideology regarding literacy defined by political or other unifying factors. Such literacy is fiscally supported by government and politics as well as by "mainstream" theory and practice. The United States and many Western European nations have what could be considered national literacies. Even in such environments, there are hotly contested debates regarding instructional methods, different approaches, and other challenges to the pervasive and historically embedded system. Though a national-literacy model attempts to reflect the culture of the majority of citizens, as populations within nations grow more and more culturally and linguistically diverse, this model may exclude groups outside the mainstream. A national-literacy model may not be in the best interest of such groups. According to the International Literacy Institute:

> In the classrooms of many developing countries, a significant portion of children are either illiterate in their mother tongue or receive only a few years of mother tongue instruction before a second (usually international) language is introduced as a medium of instruction. It is well known that poor second language literacy proficiency is a principal cause of high repetition and wastage [in other words, dropout] rates, and of low achievement in academic subjects in primary and secondary schools. This result has had profound consequences for employment and other outcomes of schooling. (1997, p. 1)

Certainly high dropout and grade-retention rates, low achievement in academic subjects, and high unemployment risk are not the intent of a national-literacy model. As more and more children enter school with a multiplicity of languages and cultures, it is truly in the best interest of any nation to develop its children's literacy skills using models, methods, and practices that ensure success for all its children.

As indicated by Elley et al. (1992, p. 1), "How can they [students] learn to decode and understand the vocabulary and syntax of a language that they are exposed to for only two or three hours per week? Many surveys of school literacy show that they rarely do."

Mother Tongue Literacy

Mother-tongue literacy is characterized by instruction provided in the first language(s) of the local community/communities. Efforts to promote mother-tongue literacy are based on the belief that people acquire literacy most effectively in their first languages. Indeed, native English-speaking children in the U.S. enter school with a vocabulary of several thousand words. It can be assumed that children from other language groups have similar developmentally appropriate levels of language (though these may not correspond directly with the numbers quoted for U.S. English speakers). Thus, one's ability to acquire literacy skills in one's own language is facilitated by the fact that one already has an experiential sense of the sounds, structure, and meanings associated with that language.

There is much literature regarding first- and second-language literacy and their interdependence on one another. Many studies indicate that the level of first-language literacy is the most stable predictor of a child's reading development in the second language; such studies recognize the close relationship between first- and second-language literacy skills (Cummins, 1981; Snow, 1981). According to the linguistic-interdependence hypothesis and the common underlying proficiency notion, most academic language skills acquired in the native language form part of a common underlying proficiency that supports the progress of academic language skills in a second language (Cummins, 1981).

We commit a grave disservice to indigenous communities throughout the world if we do not recognize their ability to determine for themselves the literacy practices most culturally relevant to them. Contrary to the belief of many (especially mainstream, language-dominant groups with long histories of reading and writing), it is "not how literacy affects people, but how people affect literacy. Individuals in a newly literate society, far from being passively transformed by literacy, instead actively and creatively apply literate skills to suit their own purposes and needs" (Kulick, 1993, in Street, p. 31).

To assume that instruction in indigenous languages is not possible or that indigenous languages are not an appropriate medium for learning academic subjects is highly erroneous. As an example of successful mother-tongue literacy efforts, Wilson cites Hawai'i: "It is often claimed that Hawai'i had the distinction of having the most literate citizenry of any nation in the world in the 1800s. Over 100 different newspapers were printed in Hawaiian during the 1900s with writers, editors, and readers products of Hawai'i's Hawaiian-medium public schools" (1991, p. 2).

Multiple Literacies

As languages and peoples find faster connections and communicate with one another worldwide, and as nations continue to become more culturally and linguistically diverse, the multiple-literacies model may be the only means of ensuring the perpetuation of indigenous languages. Perhaps it is necessary to regard literacy not as one uniform technical skill, but rather as something that varies according to the different contexts and societies in which it is embedded. One may then begin to refer to local literacies, which are intrinsically connected to local and regional identities, but often overlooked by national literacy campaigns. Street (1994) refers to three forms of local literacies: local literacies that include different languages and orthographies/writing systems under one national jurisdiction; local literacies that are perpetuated by indigenous peoples under socially or economically dominant literacies or jurisdictions (colonial and post-colonial influences); and lastly, vernacular literacies, which include culturally defined uses of literacy or literacy practices unique to the context in which they are found. Hornberger (1997) suggests the model of bi-literacies, which also fits into the multiple literacies category. She describes bi-literacy as any instance in which communication occurs in two or more languages in or around reading and writing.

Language Shift and Language Loss

As a result of historical events and political determinations, the U.S.-affiliated Pacific region uses English as a *lingua franca*. A dichotomous situation has arisen in the Region juxtaposing English with the local Pacific languages. On the one hand, there is a common perception throughout the Region that learning English is a means to economic success. As a result, much emphasis is placed on English instruction. On the other hand, there is a fear resonating throughout the Region that children are becoming less and less fluent in their home languages and are beginning in some places to prefer English. There is some talk among community members that the Pacific languages are threatened (i.e., that language loss is occurring). In the Pacific there are concrete examples of revitalization of "moribund languages"[1] (as in Hawai'i with the Hawaiian language and in Guam with the Chamorro language). There is increasing concern in American Samoa that fewer young people are using Samoan as their preferred mode of communication, choosing English in its stead.

The loss and subsequent death of less widely spoken languages in not a new phenomenon. According to Lockee (in Harris, n.d.), "Before Columbus arrived

[1] Moribund languages are languages for which there are only a handful of native speakers left, most of whom are elderly. In addition, the language is not being passed on to the next generation.

in North America, [it is estimated that] there were 2,000 indigenous languages spoken here . . . . Now there are only about 200, and more than half of those are close to death." Krauss (1992) estimates that there are 175 Native American languages still spoken in the United States, though he classifies 155 of these (i.e., 89% of the total) as "moribund."

Similarly, when the first European settlers arrived in Australia in 1788, there were some 250 aboriginal tongues. Aboriginal languages have dwindled considerably since then, with only 20 still viable today (Geary, 1997).

Globally, it is estimated that as many as half of the approximately 6,000 languages spoken on earth are moribund, and that an additional 40% are threatened because the number of children learning the language is decreasing significantly. That means that about 90% of the languages that exist today are likely to die or will be fighting for survival during the next century. This leaves about 600 languages, only 10% of the total, in relatively secure positions (Krauss, 1992).

Threatened Languages

It is in this context that we present Crawford's work on threatened languages. The question one might pose is "How do we determine that a language is being threatened?" Crawford (in Cantoni, 1996, p. 52) offers the following list of signs that a language is being lost:

- The number of speakers is decreasing.
- Fluency in the language increases with age, as younger generations prefer to speak another (usually the dominant) language. (In other words, the majority of fluent speakers are among the older generation.)
- Language use declines in "domains" where it was once secure (e.g., social gatherings, churches, ceremonies, cultural observances, and especially, the home).
- Growing numbers of parents fail to teach the language to their children.

A group might quantify previously mentioned indicators in a number of ways, from administering community surveys to conducting community focus groups. By focusing attention on the language situation and making concerted efforts to ascertain the "state" of the language, indigenous communities are already bringing the issue to a metacognitive level. Steps can then be taken to investigate, plan, select strategies, and forge partnerships to address the issue.

Three terms often used in discussions on language planning, maintenance, revitalization, and preservation are "prestige," "status," and "function." The increase or decrease of any of these factors helps determine in part the "robustness" of a language and may predict its survival or death. The prestige of a language is

dependent on perceptions (both speakers' and non-speakers') of the esteem (often historic) or standing attributed to it. Classical Latin and Greek are examples of high-prestige languages. They have exceptional perceived value and are accorded high esteem, but there are few purposes for the language and a limited number of speakers. The status of a language is dependent on what people can do with it culturally, economically, and demographically. "Function" is how the language is actually used; that is, what uses it serves on a daily basis.

Seven Hypotheses on the Causes and Cures of Language Loss

Many linguists have studied the phenomenon of language shift and language loss (Fishman, Hornberger, and Krauss). Crawford (in Cantoni, 1996) offers seven hypotheses on the causes and cures of language loss. By coming to terms with these hypotheses, indigenous communities and interested "outsiders" may find ways to collaborate and cooperate that will contribute to the health and well-being of the language community. The hypotheses are as follows:

1) Language shift is difficult to impose from without.
2) Language shift is determined primarily by internal changes within the language communities themselves.
3) If language choices reflect social and cultural values, language shift reflects a change in attitudes towards these values.
4) If language shift reflects a change in values, so too must efforts to reverse language shift.
5) Language shift cannot be reversed by outsiders.
6) Successful strategies for reversing language shift demand an understanding of the stage of the language shift.
7) At this stage in the U.S., the key task is to develop indigenous leadership. (pp. 51-68)

Language Shift is Difficult to Impose From Without. Although many attribute language loss to sociopolitical or historical factors methodically imposed by external forces, with the exception of cases of genocide of entire language communities, like the Tainos in the Caribbean, language shift is difficult to impose from without. It is much more likely that the loss or death of a language occurs as a complex and gradual process, through the assimilation of its speakers into other (majority) language communities. One might argue that this assimilation phenomenon is a direct result of external forces. But these forces alone cannot be held responsible for the ultimate loss of the language. Though socioeconomic or political forces can coerce language communities to assimilate, nonetheless the individual language community determines the use or disuse of the language. However, the detrimental effects of oppressive and restrictive laws forbidding the use of indigenous languages cannot be ignored. The assimilation process in the U.S. seems to be accelerating. At the turn of the century, immigrant commu-

nities in the U.S. completed the process of Anglicization (i.e., shifting from the immigrant language to English) in three generations. Currently the assimilation to English occurs in only two generations (Veltman, in Cantoni, 1996, p. 52).

Language Shift is Determined Primarily by Internal Changes Within Language Communities Themselves. These shifts do not occur in isolation, but are influenced directly or indirectly by external factors. Most often, these factors debilitate the language communities by setting up diglossic situations where the less powerful language is eventually displaced by the dominant language. Nevertheless, speakers of the indigenous language are still responsible for the ultimate loss: They, through their attitudes and actions (whether as a result of coercion, brainwashing or force), make the decision to discontinue speaking their language at home. Consciously or unconsciously they fail to pass the language on to their children; they no longer insist on use of their language during occasions and events, whether religious, cultural, or other. Obviously, these "decisions" are not always conscious or deliberate. Often they are a function of pressures placed upon them by the dominant society. And these decisions frequently have economic or social implications for upward mobility.

If Language Choices Reflect Social and Cultural Values, Language Shift Reflects a Change in These Values. Language shift may be an indicator of transformations in a language community's system of values and beliefs. Notions such as individualism (versus collectivism), pragmatism (versus philanthropy), and materialism (versus spiritualism) are Western ways of thinking. These are probably the patterns that best characterize U.S. mainstream society and have most significantly contributed to the modification or alteration of indigenous communities' values and beliefs (at least among the younger generations). The shift from the indigenous language to English in the case of Native American languages was inevitable as successive generations perceived the old ways and traditions as "backward," uneducated, or of little importance. The weakening or decrease in numbers of venues in which the language had its stronghold also contributed to the shift.

> At the same time that the Hawaiian language was clothing itself with a literature in the Western style, profound changes in the social and economic life of the [sic] natives and in the structure of the population were rapidly weakening the vitality of the native tongue. (Reinecke, 1969, p. 30)

If Language Shift Reflects a Change in Values, so Too Must Efforts to Reverse the Language Shift. Self-determination, maintaining cultural values and traditions, and increasing the prestige of indigenous languages are all part of a greater effort. That is, to revitalize a language, the language community must strive for a greater good, a more comprehensive movement. It requires a groundswell from the indigenous community that incorporates not only the language but also the traditions and values of the community. Prime examples of the revitalization are the language-immersion programs in Hawai'i and New Zealand. These programs are part of a larger societal goal for these Pacific peoples. A resurgence of local traditions including renewed interest in navigation, implements, hula and chanting, farming, and fishing has had a great impact on life in Hawai'i due in part to the language-revival efforts. And this must come from within. One can, no doubt, find advocates in linguists, researchers, anthropologists, and others, but without the buy-in of the community, nothing will come of it.

Language Shift Cannot Be Reversed by Outsiders, However Well-Meaning. The bottom line regarding this hypothesis is that the members of the endangered language community must empower themselves to reverse the language shift. This entails raising the consciousness of the community on issues related to language and culture loss and generating a grass-roots activism that engenders pride in the indigenous language and culture, thereby elevating its prestige, status, and function. Parents must be inspired to pass the language on to their children and to convince the wider community to create venues for its use.

Successful Strategies for Reversing Language Shift Require an Understanding of the Current Stage. Assessing the situation by obtaining information about the extent to which the language is threatened is of major importance. Many strategies have been either poorly planned or did not consider the factors necessary for success. Where is the language still spoken and by whom? How many speakers are there and what is their fluency? What are their ages? Does the language have a standard orthography? What literacy efforts have been attempted in the past? What factors militate against the acquisition and use of the language? These are just a few of the questions that would help clarify the current state of the language.

The Key Task Is To Develop Indigenous Leadership. This might then also include centralizing information on successful language programs and projects, organizing communities, identifying key knowledge holders, and planning. However this is done, it is essential that indigenous community members provide strong leadership.

Literacy Issues in Indigenous Communities

> Research in cultures that have newly acquired reading and writing draws our attention to the creative and original ways in which people transform literacy to their own cultural concerns and interests. Research into the role of literacies in the construction of ethnicity, gender, and religious identities makes us wary of accepting the uniform model of literacy that tends to be purveyed with the modern nation state: The relationship of literacy and nationalism is itself in need of research at a time when the dominant or standard model of literacy frequently subserves the interests of national politics. (Street, 1993, p. 1)

One example of a failed literacy initiative originated with federal legislation designed to use literacy to control the Navajo Nation. The U.S. government believed that if the Navajo were taught to read in their own language, the government could send out missives in Navajo regarding the reduction of their livestock. It was thought that missives in the indigenous language were more likely to be adhered to than any in English. The Navajo people recognized this thinly veiled attempt to subjugate them and refused to be led down the literacy path. Thus, for this particular group, there was a negative sentiment associated with the written word—even in their own language—because it was linked to a dictatorial and manipulative government program (Crawford, in Cantoni, 1996).

Hornberger (1997) categorizes the work of sociolinguists, literacy specialists, and indigenous leaders according to three themes: indigenous literacies as language planning from the bottom up; as doors of opportunity for the marginalized; and as cultural expression for enrichment.

Indigenous Literacies as Language Planning

In her book *Indigenous Literacies in the Americas* (1997), Hornberger reported finding that successful first-language literacy efforts occurred locally with the involvement and initiative of the indigenous communities. Hornberger supplies a handy framework appropriate for use by indigenous communities engaged in such efforts; the framework provides guidelines and approaches that are helpful in examining issues related to any indigenous community's literacy-planning efforts. The categories included in the framework are status-of-language planning, corpus planning, and acquisition planning.

Status of Language

> To reverse cultural loss requires a change in attitude from perceiving an indigenous culture as a deficit and a barrier to overcome to perceiving it as having value and meaning within a contemporary context. (Lipka & Ilustik, in Hornberger, 1997, p. 46)

Much of a language's "robustness," that is, its health and vitality, is related to perceptions of the language's status on the part of its speakers, the community, and the larger non-speaking community, sometimes the dominant culture/language community. As part of literacy planning, Hornberger (1997) suggests that the standardization of the language, its officialization or nationalization and prescription at governmental level all contribute significantly to high language status. In other words, indigenous communities should seek to have government agencies recognize their language officially at a national level and create some guidelines mandating its use. A language decreases in level of prestige when it is not officially recognized and when there are few sociocultural domains for its use.

In addition to these policy-level decisions, indigenous communities should also examine the "state of the language" (such as the ages and the number of speakers) and plan for revival, maintenance, and increase in the variety and quantity of domains for its use. Likewise, there should be increased opportunities for both insiders and outsiders to learn to use the language. As more and more people learn to speak, read, and write the language, its perceived value increases.

Some questions communities might ask are:

- Is our language officially recognized at the local, state, or national level? Is it used for any official functions? What language is used for government documents?
- Is there legislation that encourages or supports our language's use in school or other official venues?
- How is our language perceived within our own indigenous community? By elders? By working-age adults? By teens? By children?
- How is our language perceived by those outside our community?
- How many native speakers of our language are there? What are their ages?
- What is the number of domains in which our language is used? Their importance?

Acquisition Planning

If the goal of a language policy and resultant practices is to develop highly literate speakers (i.e., fluent readers and writers of the language), then much effort must be put in to supporting the users and learners of the language. This means developing educators who are not only speakers, but who also have the pedagogical and didactic expertise to provide effective instruction in the language. This overlaps considerably with the corpus-planning category, which ensures that there is consistency in the form of the language. It is also important to identify how the language is acquired and how literacy in the language is attained (if at all). The following are just a few questions communities might ask:

- Do parents speak the language to their children? Do children respond in the same language? Do parents use another (dominant) language to speak to their children even when parents may not be fluent in that language?
- Are increasing numbers of children unable to understand their parents' language?
- Are there opportunities for non-speakers or people outside the community to learn the language?
- Can people read and write in our language? Where are they learning these skills and from whom? Have we thought about how our language should be taught? Are developmentally appropriate curriculum and materials available?
- What motivation is there to use our language? What militates against use of our language?
- Do we have well-trained teachers to teach reading and writing in our language?
- Where can we use our language outside our homes?
- If our language is taught in schools, does the "content" of the instruction reflect our community's values and traditions or is it merely a translation from a mainstream dominant language?

The issue of preparing teachers to teach reading and writing in an indigenous language varies from community to community. There are Pacific-island communities in which the language is used by all community members, young and old. Yet there is no prerequisite for teachers (especially at the elementary level) who provide instruction in children's first-language reading. Teachers are assumed to be capable of teaching reading and writing in the language because they are community members who have chosen to enter the teaching profession. In Native American communities where there are few native speakers left, community colleges have consulted with tribal leaders to establish pools of language teachers certified by the tribe. Each tribe is responsible for developing its own criteria.

Yet instruction in indigenous languages goes beyond simply learning the mechanics of the language. It is of utmost importance that the content of the instruction mirror the cultural values and traditions embodied by the language. There is much controversy in multilingual settings like Kenya and Tanzania where elementary school texts in English and Swahili were analyzed for content (Mbuyi, 1987). Mbuyi organized his findings around broad categories such as daily life, Africanization, African traditions, cooperative behavior, and rural development. He argues that it is not only the medium of instruction that affects teaching and learning but the social policies/ideologies that are perpetuated by the content and curriculum. He comments that though one might assume that "mother-tongue medium textbooks will be more relevant to the local needs and teach more about local culture, it has never been proved conclusively that 'language switch' is the factor responsible for making the curriculum relevant" (p. 6).

Corpus Planning

Codifying an oral language that may have multiple regional dialects and variants is a complex issue. Corpus planning involves standardization, including identification of a consistent orthography, lexicon, and grammar and usage rules. If this issue has not been addressed, communities should decide whether it is feasible to have one set standard for the language. There may be a need to develop multiple orthographies or alternate acceptable variants. These are a few of the questions communities should explore:

- Does our language have a standard, accepted, and agreed upon orthography? Do we have dictionaries or other reference books for our language?
- Are there regional or dialectical variants of our language? Does the standard orthography accommodate these variants?
- How shall we determine the standard form of our language? Will members of the community be excluded by this decision? How will we allow for dialect variations in written form?
- Do we have a lexicon or language council that makes decisions regarding the use of loaned words, new words, word meaning, and acceptable grammar and usage?
- Will we use diacritical markings for our language? What punctuation will authentically represent our language?

Indeed there are many examples of indigenous communities struggling to develop orthographies for their language in the context of multiple dialects and regional variations. Among the Hualapai community in Peach Springs, Arizona, there are dialect differences as a result of the merging of various bands relocated to one locale. "People are naturally loyal to their native dialect (as we all tend to be) and often engage in ridicule about each other's linguistic errors [in Hualapai] . . . for those who are not [fully proficient], especially teenagers and young adults, it creates a lot of self-consciousness" (Cantoni, 1996, p. 61).

While developing initial reading assessments for the Chuukese language, researchers found that up until the finalization of the test, its developers, all local language-arts specialists, continued to disagree upon the "correct" spelling for a number of words. The origin of the disagreement resided in the fact that there are several dialects in the Chuukese language. These vary according to location within or outside the lagoon of this island state in the Federated States of Micronesia.

In the matter of orthography, Smalley (1963) proposes five criteria to be used in the development of a writing system for a language in descending order of importance. They are:

- **Maximum motivation for the learner,** recognizing that an alphabet is only useful if it is used by the speakers of the language it represents.
- **Maximum representation of speech,** meaning that native-speakers must agree that the chosen symbols represent their language, its sounds, and structures.
- **Maximum ease of learning,** which speaks for itself. Any system too complicated will deter literacy practices (both reading and writing) in communities in the process of developing orthographies.
- **Maximum transfer,** which implies that all conventions of writing are utilized (e.g., diacritics that clarify meaning, but are not needed by fluent native speakers) and that literacy skills learned in the first language can be transferred to some extent to other languages.
- **Maximum ease of reproduction,** which has implications for the production of reading materials and any machine-produced form of writing. The writing system must be replicable in print forms. However, for communities that use reading and writing mostly for informal or personal purposes (such as letter or note writing), this particular criterion may not be of great significance.

Despite challenges in the development of orthographies for indigenous languages, there are many successful examples of this phenomenon. Of particular importance is the development of the Cherokee syllabary by Sequoyah, a Cherokee who did not read or write in any language. He had witnessed English speakers' use of "talking leaves," observing that they were able to represent their language with marks on paper. Thus, he began the development of what would become the Cherokee syllabary, some 85 (originally 86) letters or symbols representing vowels, consonants, and combinations of consonants followed by vowels. Although the syllabary did not fully represent the sounds of Cherokee (e.g., there were no diacritical marks indicating vowel length or tones—two features important for distinguishing meaning), it seemed to create few problems for fluent Cherokee speakers learning to read (Silver & Miller, 1997).

Indigenous Literacies as a Door of Opportunity

Literacy in first languages is increasingly perceived as providing opportunity and means for empowerment, especially for communities that have historically been disenfranchised or otherwise excluded. Children are empowered: They are more communicative and secure and less inhibited when teaching and learning are reflective of their own culture and language. Teachers are empowered: They become cultural brokers, reflective educators, and community leaders. Authors are empowered: Indigenous languages can be a vehicle for personal and professional growth as well as a force for inspiring social change. Communities are empowered: Indigenous peoples investigate their own cultures to contribute to preservation efforts and in order for communities to understand themselves. People are empowered: Literacy does not destroy or acculturate, but leads to self-realization.

And there is compelling evidence for encouraging literacy: Languages with literacy traditions generally survive longer than languages without literacy traditions or languages with only oral traditions (Anonby, 1999).

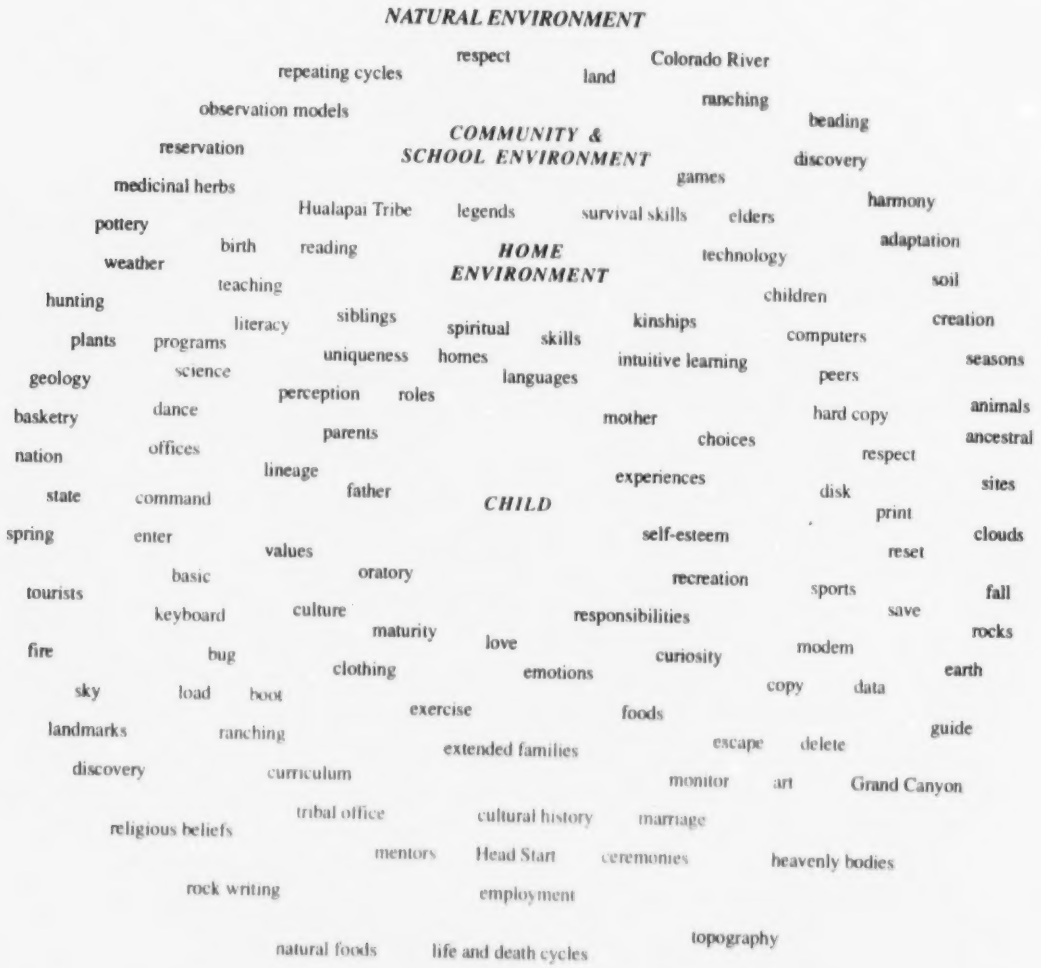
Indigenous Literacies as Cultural Expression and Enrichment

> Many people were keepers of oral histories . . . many Yup'ik people would share these stories during the long winter months. An elder always ensured that the main theme of the story was not lost or helped guide the storyteller. Today, stories are no longer being told during the long and dark winter months, nor are the elders always present to ensure the accuracy and continuity of the stories. Thus, stories are becoming fragmented or forgotten. Schools, which were once the site of cultural exclusion, now serve as one of the domains in which these stories can be perpetuated and archived. (Lipka & Ilustik, in Hornberger, 1997, p. 47)

This model of literacy celebrates indigenous knowledge and builds on the linguistic and cultural strength of the community. This is uniquely expressed not just through indigenous language, but also through indigenous knowledge and traditions—diverse ways of knowing that draw on community funds of knowledge. Frequently included in the descriptions of these diverse ways of knowing are topics related to a holistic way of life and to successful management of the environment (i.e., people's relationship to their environment, their kinship to each other, and the respective roles they play).

Successful literacy models include local cultural elements that reflect the life of the community. Thus, there exist extensive vocabularies in indigenous languages depending upon their geographical locations, including taxonomies for flora and fauna; directional and geographic orientations; and lexical domains like hunting, trapping and fishing, animal husbandry, farming, ecology and nature conservation, management of biodiversity, family, clan or tribal ties, environmental descriptors, and hierarchies. The inclusion of elders and other "knowledge holders" is critical to the process. When these elements are integrated into the first-language literacy curriculum there are obvious advantages, including a solid knowledge base and adequate vocabulary. However, most literacy efforts must also include elements from the dominant culture. The Hualapai child-centered curriculum framework illustrated in Figure 1 is an excellent example of the holistic nature of teaching and learning in that community.

Figure 1. Hualapai Curriculum Framework (Hornberger, 1997, p. 104)



22 BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Culturally Relevant Uses of Literacy by Indigenous Communities

Throughout this document, literacy has been identified as a tool and means to expanding opportunities, improving prospects, and preserving, perpetuating, and maintaining indigenous languages. It has been argued that literacy is culturally defined and that it manifests itself differently within each unique context and society. Thus, literacy practices vary from community to community. Nevertheless, researchers have examined the use of reading and writing in a variety of contexts. Hornberger (1997, p. 233) describes three well-known researchers' categorization of the uses of reading and writing.

Heath (1983) describes the uses of reading as:

- instrumental
- social interactional
- recreational
- news-related
- confirmational
- educational

and of writing:

- memory aids
- financial
- public records
- expository
- social interactional
- reinforcement/ substitution for oral messages

Resnick and Resnick's (1989) types of literacy transactions are:

- sacred
- useful
- informational
- persuasive
- pleasure-giving
- personal-familial
- expressive
- school

Kulick and Stroud's (1993) types of uses of reading are:

- social-interactional
- truth-seeking
- confirmational
- recreational
- instrumental
- preparation for oral performance

and of writing:

- request-directed
- memory aid
- official event
- emblematic

These categories may be of use to communities in formulating their goals and objectives for providing local literacy instruction.

In the interest of expanding the concept of literacy to include uses (and non-uses) of literacy by indigenous communities, examples from several locales throughout the world are provided in this section.

An example from Papua, New Guinea:

> . . . the ways in which Gapun villagers have incorporated literacy skills into their community differ from the ways in which the written word is often assumed to be used in literate society. Noticeably absent from Gapun are those types of reading and writing which are stressed in Western societies and educational systems. Gapuners do not read to gain information about people they do not know or about events that do not directly concern them. Nobody in the village considers that one can become better informed or more competent in any way by reading . . . Consequently, there is no notion in the village that everyone should read. The act of reading in itself has no value apart from accomplishing some immediate goal like confirming the words to a hymn, preparing to recite a prayer, reading a note one has been given, deciding to discover a heretofore concealed truth in a religious text, or checking the hand of cards one has just been dealt in a game with friends. (Street, 1993, pp. 32-33)

It is of particular interest that the Gapuners do not perceive reading as a practice to be used by all. In fact, Gapuners tend to use literacy for very immediate purposes that reflect the indirect nature of interactions in a community that above all values an individual's independence. No one ever talks about writing in terms of aesthetics, and there is no notion that everyone should be able to write. Gapuners' uses for literacy include writing short notes asking for favors such as the loan of a hunting dog or gun and for recording dates of deaths in a village (used primarily by national government employees as a ceremonial ritual to lend an "official" cast to someone's death).

Quechua speakers live in the Andean republics of South America. The total number of speakers exceeds 10 million. Many Quechua people in Peru are bilingual in Quechua and Spanish. It is their uses of Quechua literacy that is of interest. In three cases of functional Quechua literacy (Hornberger, 1997), individuals used Quechua to promote their own language, teach the Word of God (religious purposes), promulgate Quechua knowledge, and build Quechua identity. Oddly enough, though the use of Spanish is becoming more common in informal venues such as the home and community, the use of Quechua in formal functions is increasing, even though the language has historically held a position of low prestige in Peru.

Conclusion

The choices regarding literacy made by indigenous communities are highly divergent. In instances where the communities have a true voice and are not unduly influenced by socioeconomically dominant language groups, it is clear that they use reading and writing for purposes highly relevant to their contexts. Unfortunately, for the vast majority of indigenous communities, choices free of social and economic concerns for successive generations are not available. Thus, the language of economics often triumphs over the language of the heart and home.

This document has provided information on literacy in its broadest interpretation as well as the more limited in-scope application that includes only reading and writing. It is hoped that the underlying message—literacy practices are socially constructed—has resonated throughout the piece. The information regarding language shift and loss was purposely included for the benefit of communities that are fearful of or are in the midst of experiencing a shift or loss in their language. It is truly only a snapshot of the vast amounts of research available on the topic. The section on language status, acquisition planning, and corpus planning may be of use to communities seeking to improve the organization of their first language efforts. The subsequent sections highlighted the empowering qualities of literacy in first languages for indigenous communities. The last section offered some examples of authentic uses of literacy by indigenous communities. This synthesis will have fulfilled its purpose if it is of support and assistance to educators, researchers, and most important, indigenous people in search of information about literacy and its application in their communities.

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